

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: SAMBATH BO [CAMBODIA]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL

DATE: APRIL 15, 2008

C = CHRISTOPH

S = SAMBATH

Tape 08.37

C: If you could just state your name, and your immigrant background?

S: Sambath Bo, and I'm Cambodian.

C: And you live in the Highland area?

S: We live on Stevens.

C: Great.... can we talk a little bit about your family's migration history? Do you know why your family...were you born in the United States, or?

S: I was born in the United States. But my mom came over here due to the killing fields.... They ran for the borders, the Thai border and to the Khao I Dang. And then they came over here. They were sponsored. There was a Cambodian lady and she married an American. And she had money. So she was sponsoring anybody that she could from Cambodia. So my mom was lucky. She went to Texas. And that's how I was born in Houston, Texas.

C: Did your family spend much time in the refugee camps in Thailand, or were they relatively fortunate to get out faster than a lot of others?

S: My mom, when she talks about her killing fields, I think she...I... think that she does have post traumatic stress syndrome, because when I listen to her, her story is kind of like, it's very... choppy, but all of them can be pretty violent... She actually got tortured.

What she told me... they used to do, is put a bag around her neck, and then would suffocate her, and then pour water on her and wake her up again, and then do it to her again. So she went through the camps, and then I think she grabbed her sister, and then they, they ran. They left the camp. And then... I don't know how, like I said, you know, her memory is so choppy.

C: No, I understand.

S: I don't even know how the order is...

C: You don't want to push it either.

S: And then when I question her, she really gets defensive then. She says, "You don't know what I went through," and stuff like that. So I don't question her about it. She experienced it, you know, and then her sister died in her arms.... I think she ran ahead of her, and then a bomb dropped. So it's kind of...she told me that her sister split in half, and that she had to grab the sarong that her parents gave her. That's what she used to wrap her sister up and bury her.

C: Oh boy.

S: They were not even far away from the border. She says probably maybe a couple of hours. And she was just so excited that they made it to the border and she ran ahead, because I think they were in a group of four or five, six people.

C: Did she step on a landmine do you know, or?

S: My mom said a bomb.... It could be a landmine, and it could not be, but she, all she said was a bomb.... She experienced it. She went through the camps. She ran away. She went through all of that.

C: Do you know how old your mom was at the time?

S: She changed her age when she came here. When she had me it said she was twenty-four. But she used to tell me that she had me when she was twenty-one.... I know she was in her late teenager years, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, somewhere around there.

C: So she arrived then in Houston, Texas. And why did your mom or her family decide to come to Lowell?

S: She was looking for her relatives, because most of our family, she said, didn't survive or she assumed them dead. And she heard that her cousin had made it over here. The economy back then down in Texas wasn't really doing well. They heard that there were better jobs, and a larger Cambodian population, and there might be a chance that we can run into... my mom's cousins. So, and then she just grabbed two other families from Texas, and then came up.

C: To Lowell.

S: Not to Lowell first. Actually they went to Lynn first. Somehow we settled in Lynn first, and then we came to Lowell.

C: Lynn has a pretty sizeable Cambodian community, not quite as large as Lowell but...was she ever able to connect with more family members, or?

S: Our family, from what she told me is small.... Most of her brothers and sisters have passed away, and they never got a chance to have a family. So there was none of that. And then my father history is actually really confusing, because once he passed away when I was eight, my mom just doesn't talk about him at all.... I know nothing about him, his past history. She just does not talk about him. She talks about him, but she never talks about anything in regards to his past, or how he is, you know, like how he was, or anything like that.

C: A lot of that is probably connected to trauma. It's a sad story! How long have you lived in Lowell with your family?

S: Let's see, I came here when I was... I went to kindergarten twice.... That's why I'm a year older than everybody [chuckles] throughout grade school. So I came here when I was six when I came to Lowell.... I'm going to say six, because I remember I made it into the kindergarten school, Greenhalgh. I've been in Lowell now for nineteen years.

C: That's a good chunk of time. You don't live too far away from Cupples Square where there are a lot of Cambodian businesses. Do you consider yourself being part of a Cambodian neighborhood, or do you think of it as a mixed neighborhood... how do you understand it?

S: When we bought the place, somebody else bought a place across the street from us. So we moved in at the same time. We're both Cambodian families. And across the street is a Cambodian family. Two more houses got bought up. I think it's mixed, but... we're starting to see more [Cambodians].... Our direct neighbors... they're like an elderly white couple.... Besides there's one family that's African American. But other than that I've seen three new Cambodian families move in.

C: When you shop do you go to places like Market Basket, or Hannaford's, or do you also go to Cambodian businesses, or do you make an effort to go to both?

S: I have to go both. And that's why I hate it when we have big family gatherings, because it takes so much time, because I have to go pick up some stuff from the Cambodian store, and then make it...because meat-wise they like to get it from the American store, because it's cheaper.... But you can still get meat at the Cambodian place. But when you want to get the most for your dollar you have to buy your meat at

the American store. But most of the vegetables, ingredients, sauces and everything, usually comes from the Cambodian stores.

C: Do you go to Cupples Square or Pailin Plaza?

S: Actually I, I go to Cupples Square. I go [Pailin] Plaza.... There are a couple of stores there. I like to go to Battambang too, because it's really set up like an American store with wide aisles. But the traffic is so horrible there that I kind of stay away from it. But you can go there, you buy bulk, it's a better place to go to, because they're stocked.

C: No, it's a great store... I've been there a couple of times.

S: That's actually my friend's aunt.

C: Oh, okay.

S: She tried to hook me up with a bottle of her sauce. [Both laugh]

C: Excellent! You went to college at UML. Now you're working several jobs, right?

S: I had, let me see, three gigs, three jobs. My stint with the Theodore Edson Parker Foundation just came to conclusion in February.... I forgot how long I was with them. It was either three years, or two years. I was with them for quite some time.

C: And now what kind of jobs do you have?

S: I'm with LTC. I'm with LTC as the Associate Producer.

C: What is LTC? Sorry.

S: Lowell Telecommunications Corporation. It's the public access station. And then I'm doing the Water Festival, but I'm...I was the event coordinator for two years, but I'm starting to get burnt out, and I'm actually thinking about withdrawing.... There are not enough volunteers as... but then I don't want the Water Festival to fail....

C: Why do you think there aren't enough volunteers? Do you think it's just a general apathy, or are people too busy, or?

S: I've talked to a lot of people. I've talked to somebody who I kind of see as a mentor. But she said there is a generational shift between like, you know.... Her generation is all about taking care of the family and creating the sense of family. So anything that keeps in touch with tradition. The next generation is my generation, [there] you get some that "get it," and then some [for whom] it is just about me, me, me. There's just a generational shift. Like philanthropy and volunteering just seems to be not as big as they used to be. I don't know what it is... I've talked to many people... Asians, whites, whatever, they all came to kind of the same conclusion. It's just hard to find volunteers in general. And the

Water Festival the majority of it is just volunteers. The Board of Directors um, the only person that's paid is me, but there are a lot of obligations and responsibilities that come with it.

C: I can imagine you're probably not getting paid all that well especially considering the time you have to put into it.

S: Yes. The thing is, if I feel like I didn't do a good job, I actually report less hours, just because I feel guilty. I don't want to bill to the Festival when I feel like I didn't do well.

C: Do you mind talking a little bit more about the intergenerational split?

S: The way I see it... the best example I guess.... I'm twenty-five and my younger sister is two years old, but the next youngest one is fourteen.... I used to sacrifice... my social life just to stay home, cook and stuff like, while my mom was working, and took care of my brothers and sisters. Just like the second mom, you know. My mom always used to say that, "You're like the second mom. You're the oldest, so you're like the second mom." But my younger sister, when I ask her, "You need to stay home and you know, do your chores," and she's like, "Why is it my responsibility? Why do I have to sacrifice my time?" I think it has something to do with the American culture as a whole. With the media and the sense of attachment too... they've become detached from the family. I don't know how to explain that.

C: No, no, no. I think you're doing a perfectly good job in explaining that. I mean there's always a little bit of a stereotype about the city of Lowell about gangs and stuff. Do you see that reflected in the intergenerational issues as well? Or do you rather not want to talk about that?

S: I used to do the city council meetings... I don't do it anymore, but they always were "oh the gangs".... There are some kids... [but] I don't see it all the time. It's not even rampant either. It's just that when they do something it is right on the front page of the news in the Lowell Sun. You know what I mean? But it's these kids that come from a really bad family where...the household is just dysfunctional. And it is not every family that has a dysfunctional household. I don't know how to... When I see these kids, they're either really hostile and they grew up really poor, and their parents are not there, and their family have issues – addiction, or whatever, gambling. That's why they run to gangs. It's not as a big thing as they make it out to be. But maybe they're more advanced and violent than they used to be, because they have access to guns....

C: Does that bother you when you hear mainstream society talking about the Cambodian gangs.

S: Yes, it does bother me. Because when you really look at it, during the Water Festival, the cops don't like congregation of young Cambodian guys. They automatically assume it's a gang. So that affects people who want to attend the Water Festival, because they say, "Oh if I go, I'm going to get harassed by the cops. And then if I tell them off, then

they will harass me and then I will do something, and then I get arrested and then I get beaten up.” And they make us pay a significant amount of money to have Lowell Police patrol there, because they say that there is gang presence there. Now our only event to keep cultural preservation and heritage going, it’s totally being affected by this image that the police and the city have towards young Southeast Asian men.

C: Does the city help with the differing some of the costs? Because it seems like it’s a good cultural asset.

S: No, they’re not. It’s a big tug of war. I really... This city, yah, it’s supposed to be the melting pot, and people give it a lot of praise, but if you get into the internal workings of the city, there is also a lot of bigotry... Should I even mention how much it costs?

C: If you’re comfortable... if you’d rather not...

S: Well for ‘07 roughly we paid \$10,000 for the police patrol. And every year it goes up. At one point the city was involved and we didn’t have to pay.... But they let go of it.... They still use us in advertisement and PR. That’s one thing I don’t get. But I think it’s because the Cambodian leaders themselves can’t get together to, kind of either throw it in their face, or scare them, or you know, get together to actually be like “we are a unified voice.”

C: What you’re talking about is very much in line with politics, which is another issue I would like you to talk about. There’s not much in terms of political representation of Cambodian, Southeast Asians, or for that matter, of new immigrant groups. Why do you think that is? Do you have an explanation for that? Would you like to see that change? I just would like to hear your thoughts on that.

S: I think that a lot of them...Even though the Cambodian community has been here for like ten, twenty years, some of them are not citizens. They’re Americanized, but they’re not citizens. Then the ones who have citizenship they may not be fluent in English.... And let me tell you, I went to the polls to try to vote, and I got confused, and I got frustrated, because I forgot my ward number. The lady was just kind of looking, not even trying to help? They weren’t helpful. The polling place is just confusing and kind of scary... the poll stations are not even clearly marked. And you don’t even know that somebody’s speaking your language there either. I believe that the system in place is at the disadvantage for the new [immigrant] community.

C: Do you feel that there is activism among younger or older Cambodians to change that? Or is there just too much division.... Because there was this one year, where you had at least two Cambodians running for city council, and then another year no one was running?

S: I think there is political division... Cambodian politics....

C: And so that’s reflected here in the United States?

S: Especially with the older folks. They know what party you support in Cambodia.

C: So the political landscape is reflected here as well.

S: I don't know if it's rampant, but I've heard people make comments, "Well oh yah, he supports the Royalist Party".... All of this stuff is going on right now. I don't know... I haven't talked to a lot of elders, because I am very blunt and I get frustrated....

C: Is there also an issue, and maybe that is my stereotypical perception of Southeast Asia, with the age respect? Does that play in there as well?

S: Yes. And I don't really follow it. Just because you're older than me you demand respect? My mom always gets mad at me when I talk bad about somebody who is older. But I just don't believe in the things that they've done for the community. So I'd be talking back to them, and she's like, "How could you?" "They're older than you?" And "Don't ruin our family name." "What do you know?"

C: Do you still speak Khmer?

S: Yes... not too well. I actually was fluent in writing and reading when I was younger, when they offered a second language at school, at the Rogers School. I used to read poetry books and stuff like that. I used to write stories as part of class projects. And so I know for sure that I was fluent at one point. But then my English was getting better, and my mother transferred me to an English class.

C: Did you go to Lowell High School?

S: Yes I did.

C: This might not be quite the space you're in, but do you think, if you have children, would you want them to learn Khmer as well? Is this something that's important to you?

S: I do. I really do....I even told myself that I'm going to speak Khmer to my younger sister, because she's two. And without knowing it I answer her in English. So it's going to be hard.... Because I do want them to be fluent in my language, Khmer, and whoever I'm with, if it happens to be Laotian, or Thai, Spanish, whatever. I want them to be fluent in their parents' language.

C: Do you go to Temple at all? I mean you've been to the Laotian Temple for New Year, but what role does religion play in your life?

S: For me religion is...like our culture and our traditions... it is so intertwined.... Even though I'm really Americanized, and a modern-day... young adult, but I do follow the tradition and culture... its important.... That's the reason why I speak out against any

injustice against the Cambodian Community and not having the Water Festival would be a stab at the very core of the Cambodian identity.

C: Do you, do you feel like Buddhism is part of that identity?

S: Yes. Being selfless, and... when I go to the Temple I try to be serene and not think of anything bad when I am in there. My religion is not a conscious one. It's everyday culture.

C: Do you go to temple a lot and do you go to a specific one?

S: I just go to the old temple in Chelmsford, because that's the one that I knew of since I was a kid. But I know there's a new one in Lowell, "Old Glory." I just go to temple because what it represents. Because the monks are there, but I don't follow the political BS that is involved with it.

C: Are you talking about the upstairs, downstairs temple?

S: Yes. I think it's a disgrace. Even when it comes to our religion we can't get along. That's just horrible. And it's the same religion.

C: Do you think this is getting resolved, because it was supposedly in the courts, but then is it still going on?

S: I didn't know that.

C: No, apparently. And then the judge basically said, "Sort it out amongst yourself." That's I think the last I've heard about it. Is this...Do you feel like this is going to get resolved at some point, or?

S: It needs to....I don't know, because the old folks are getting older, and then the younger people, I don't really see them to be too involved with the temple. And then the ones who are involved are influenced by their parents' politics. So I don't know if it will get resolved, unless somebody comes in and just intervenes. I don't know who that person would be.

C: Do you feel that it is a generational thing. That the younger crowd is sort of dropping off at temple? I don't want to call it temple membership, but people that visit the temple, is it mostly the older generation?

S: There's the older generation, and... traditional families still go. Like my family is traditional. My grandmother, she became a nun. And she just goes over there and she takes care of cleaning and cooking, and stuff like that, for the monk. And she always gets involved with the temple. But then when she passed away...and she's not even my grandmother really. She's my aunt. Since my grandmother passed away she

became...she's my mom's aunt, because my grandmother, my real grandmother passed away. She is my grandmother.

C: Okay. So she's your adopted....

S: Yah, it's not even a question. It's my grandmother.

C: Yes, it's just the way it is. What do you do for fun?

S: For fun?... I guess I go clubbing, I go barhopping, I... do a lot of just hanging out, because what I do for work is so exhausting, that in my free time I just like to hangout. So if my friends are going out to drink, or whatever, I'll go with them. If they're having barbecues I'm there too. And it's just more like most of the time when we're together it's mostly socializing. I like nature walks, walk around Boston, you know.... I used to have a hobby... taking pictures... but...it costs money. So I need a hobby that doesn't cost money. [Laughs]

C: Were you able to travel to Cambodia at all?

S: No I haven't, but... My mom like always tell me that I should go. And she definitely wants us to go next year... to see the remaining family members.... I want to go, but then I'm kind an anxious feeling too.... And the way I talk is very abrupt. My Khmer is very abrupt. So it sounds like I'm rude.... And that's not the only concern. My mom tells me about all the family drama in Cambodia. Do I really want to go to another country to, to be involved in another family drama that I probably get pulled in for the rest of my life?

C: Yes [laughs]. But having a family an ocean away, which is my case too, even though there is drama there's still an entire ocean between you and that drama....

S: Yes but my mom... the thing is she has given them money, and then she found out that the one who was supposed to distribute the money didn't distribute it. Got greedy and kept the money....

C: Has your mom been able to go back?

S: Yes she has. That's how she found out. She went to the temple. She gave money. She helped to get family members dental work. Just set them up. Help them buy some land and so they can grow crops. Try to get them to be self-sufficient.

C: I know you've had some interaction with the Lowell National Historic Park. Have you gone to any of the historic exhibits at the park?

S: I went to the...I went... I went through the Mogan Center.... I remember the display on Cambodian Art at one point, and then I went there when they had the Mill Girls. But that's the only two things that I've been through. Oh yah, and Destination World, Cambodia.

C: Okay.

S: I think that's it.

C: Do you feel like the Park is doing an adequate job in presenting the Cambodian Community's history in Lowell, in their engagement with the Water Festival?

S: I'm very critical of all of those big institutions that are run by white older men, because it sounds good... "we're equal"... "we want diversity"... but when you see the stuff that they're approving, and the programs that they're doing, it doesn't reflect it. And the Park only up until this year started to acknowledge the Water Festival at a grand scale, but before that they kind of gave us use of maybe one or two rangers, and they didn't charge us for it.... I have hope for Michael Creasy that he's going to take the National Park and... move in the right direction. But I think it's because people push them too. The National Park can do more. It should do more because they have a big budget.

C: Yes. Now's your chance, what do you think should the Park do? Not that they're necessarily going to listen to me....

S: The Park should set aside some funds and manpower. We dedicate so many dollars to help run this specific event. I think it's what they should do, and highlight the Water Festival in their galleries, whatever did they do for other things as well, you know. In their brochure, whatever, because it's culture, it's the Park, and it's happening at the Sampas Pavilion.... If they can give money to the Lowell Folk Festival, which is the largest festival in Lowell, then they should be able to you know, set aside some funds for the second largest festival in Lowell. I think too, it's just that they always throw this at us. "Show us some statistics, show us some numbers how your community is actually benefiting Lowell?" I get this from random city officials and people within the National Park. "It just serves your community. It just serves Southeast Asians: Laos, Vietnamese, Thai, and Cambodian. And when you guys get together you bring a lot of drama, and a lot of fights.... So show us how you are benefiting the city." We really struggle with that image... how the city perceives us? They use us as in PR and advertisement blatantly and all the time. I don't know what they are seeing. They just either see us as not intelligent enough to comprehend what's going on, or they believe us just to be so disorganized that they use us to benefit them.

C: Well thank you so much for your time. Thank you.

S: Okay. [Laughs].

Interview ends
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